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ABSTRACT

Nine distinct programs aimed at reducing the dropout rate and bringing "at-risk" students back into the educational mainstream are described in this publication. The document first notes the social and economic costs to the nation of students dropping out before completing high school. The report then describes changes in Wisconsin's attendance law; an early intervention program initiated by the Norfolk (Virginia) Public Schools; the "Adopt-a-Student" program in Los Angeles Unified School District's Fremont High School; projects run by the Summer Training and Education Program (STEP) in Boston, Seattle, Portland (Oregon), San Diego, Fresno, and New York; an alternative high school program run by Newark (Ohio) High School; dropout recovery programs operating in Los Angeles and Duval County, Florida; and federal efforts through the Dropout Prevention and Reentry Act of 1986 and the Job Training Partnership Act. Successful programs appear to have low student-adult ratios, are offered at sites away from regular programs, provide vocational training, combine school with work, and provide such services as counseling, day care, and medical care. Questions that school boards can ask when assessing their own district's dropout policies are provided. (PGD)

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Just three years ago, with national attention clearly focused on "a nation at risk," education reformers spawned new and more rigorous standards aimed at "educational excellence." Ranging from increased graduation requirements to no pass/no play policies, the reforms emphasized the importance of "academics."

Not always considered by the reformers, however, was how the more rigorous academic standards would affect those students who were having trouble meeting existing standards. As Ernest Boyer, President of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, has said, "Raising the bar doesn't mean more students will be able to jump over it."

Recognizing the problem

"The success of school reform across the nation has caused many of us to focus on a new set of problems," wrote then Virginia Governor Charles Robb in *Reconnecting Youth: The Next Stage of Reform* (1985), the report of the Education Commission of the States' (ECS) Business Advisory Commission.

"We recognize that school reforms cannot help young people who are not in school, and that more rigorous curricula might discourage some students and cause them to drop out of school. We now must move to meet the needs of those who, despite or because of school reform, are at a greater risk of being lost to society as productive individuals."

The problem goes beyond individuals. In June 1985, Harold Hodgkinson, in the Institute for Educational Leadership's (IEL) *All One System: Demographics of Education, Kindergarten Through Graduate School*, wrote, "The problem affects everyone, and how the nation responds will help determine whether we create a permanent underclass or social cohesion."

In very real terms, the dropout problem affects everyone in terms of money. According to economist James Catterall, $228 billion in earnings—and an estimated $68 billion in local, state, and federal tax revenues—is lost for each school class (*On the Social Costs of Dropping Out*, Stanford University, 1985).

Data collected by the National Education Association (NEA) shows that businesses spent $40 million in 1985 to teach remedial reading, writing, and math. Moreover, taxpayers support unemployment, welfare, and other social services for dropouts and their families that, combined with lost tax revenues, totals $75 billion a year.

Who drops out?

Research shows that dropouts generally are poor, minorities, those lacking English language skills, children from single-parent families, and children who themselves are teenage parents—usually single and poor.

There is substantial evidence to show that students who fall behind in grade level are more prone to dropping out. But failure that results in retention generally stems from a variety of interrelated conditions linked to a student's family, school, and work experiences.

The assumption might be made that dropouts are an urban problem, but don't be fooled. Researchers at the University of Kentucky found that it is poverty—as is found in coal mining areas—that relates to the highest dropout rates.

Scope of problem

Nationally, it is estimated that 25 percent of entering high school freshmen don't graduate with their class. But differing definitions of the term "dropout," which results in inconsistent data being collected, and the inability to track students who attend school erratically has made it impossible to calculate a reliable national dropout rate.

Is a student who leaves school for a year but later returns to earn a GED counted as a dropout, for example? What about the student who completes the school year in school system "A" and enrolls in school system "B" the next fall?

The U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO) report prepared for Congress last June (*School Dropouts: The Extent and Nature of the Problem*) states: "... it would be useful to the school districts themselves if they used a standard definition for dropouts and uniform collection and reporting procedures, thus providing directly comparable data. Such changes also would help measure the effectiveness of programs in reducing the number of dropouts."

With renewed attention focused on school dropouts, programs designed to address their needs are multiplying quickly. These efforts target either the young people who already have left school, those "at risk" of dropping out, or both groups. They are being initiated by schools, community organizations, businesses, as well as through state and federal government programs.

State involvement

Changes to Wisconsin's student attendance laws in 1985, for example, require that schools provide modified programs, or alternative schools or programs, for students 16 and over. Also, the child and parent/guardian must reject

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the alternatives offered before the schools excuse a child from compulsory attendance. By age 16, however, a student's attitude toward school may be so negative that program modifications and alternatives may not be successful.

But the Wisconsin law also requires school boards to identify "children at risk" and develop plans—including remedial instruction, parental involvement, and student and community support services—for meeting their needs. (Local plans were to be ready by August 1986.) The goal is to intervene as early as possible.

The Wisconsin law defines "children at risk" as students who:

- have stopped attending school without an acceptable excuse;
- have been absent from school for 20 or more days without acceptable excuses as defined by state law;
- are parents;
- have been adjudicated delinquent;
- are one or more years behind their age group in number of credits attained or in basic skill levels.

The rules require local school systems to identify enrolled "at risk" children annually; provide a plan for meeting their needs through curriculum modifications, remedial instruction, parental involvement, pupil support services (including school counseling, social work, nursing and psychological services) and use of community, business, industry resources; and evaluate the effectiveness of their plans. Students must be able to meet the state's graduation requirements through any curriculum modifications or alternative programs provided. Also, a designated staff person must coordinate the program.

Local school effort

The Norfolk (Va.) Public Schools initiated an early-intervention program in 1983-84: SPIRAL, the Systematic Program for Instruction, Remediation, and Acceleration of Learning. First introduced into the system's 40 elementary schools, SPIRAL now has spread to the secondary level.

SPIRAL's objectives are straightforward. At the elementary level, there are two: the retention rate will be reduced by 20 percent annually; 25 percent of retained students will rejoin their grade level. The remediation component of the program gives retained elementary students who don't qualify for special education services the opportunity to "catch up" with their classmates (either within a semester or a full year) by placing them in reduced-size classes taught by specially trained teachers.

"The results exceeded our expectations," says elementary school principal Eddie Hall, who coordinates the program. "In 1984, 26 percent—354 students—of the SPIRAL students rejoined their classmates, and in 1985, even though promotion standards were increased, the percentage increased to 27 percent, or 361 students."

Hall points out that the program is cost effective, too. "It costs $3,000 per year for each retained student," he says, "Multiply that by the 354 students who caught up with their class, and you get a total of $1,062,000. We made money. The program cost only $900,000."

But the benefits go beyond money, Hall points out. "Reduced discipline problems and increased attendance mean more time for teaching and learning, higher achievement levels, improved public image, and increased revenue."

Norfolk's dropout rate has been on the decline, too. In 1983-84, the rate was 11.15 percent; the following year it dipped below the double digit mark for the first time to 9.3 percent.

"Kids drop out because they're not successful," says Hall. "By starting at the elementary level with an early remediation plan, we're aiming at a long-term reduction in the dropout rate."

One school's approach

As one of the first high schools to pilot a prevention/recovery program in the Los Angeles Unified School District, Fremont High School set up a program last year that helps students look ahead rather than back at past failures. The school identified 150 "at risk" students who were absent 15 to 20 times a semester, failed two or more classes, and whose reading skills were three years below their grade level.

According to the program's coordinator Juanita Lewis, a key part of the program is "providing regular contact with a counselor—someone showing an interest in what they're doing."

The counseling is aimed at helping students set goals and gain an understanding of the value of a high school diploma. Students are made aware of alternative programs, such as the system's occupational centers, adult evening classes, and the possibility of taking a reduced class load.

Through Fremont's "Adopt-a-Student" program, each of the identified students is teamed with a teacher or administrator. The "buddy" helps with homework, listens to problems, and, in general, provides encouragement and assistance.

Linking work and school

There is a growing consensus that potential dropouts respond to programs that combine school experiences with paid work experiences. For many students, earning money is a necessity that interferes with school. For others, school seems unimportant when they start earning money—until they realize they are in a dead-end job.

The Summer Training and Education Program (STEP) developed by Public/Private Ventures, Phila., is an attempt to "build bridges" between schools, community, and the federal youth employment program of the Job Training Partnership Act (JPTA). The goals of the program are to keep "at risk" students in school, increase graduation rates, decrease the incidence of teenage pregnancy, and provide positive work experiences for the youngsters.

Evaluation of STEP's demonstration program in five cities (Boston, Seattle, Portland, Ore., San Diego and Fresno, Calif.), which targeted disadvantaged 14- and 15-year-olds and combined work

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experience with basic skills remediation and social and sexual behavior information over two summers, shows a reduction in the usual academic losses experienced during summer break.

Another STEP program, New York City's $7.5 million School to Employment Project, targets 16- to 18-year-old students. It provides a 50 percent wage subsidy to employers who give after-school jobs to students. The youngsters attend school in the morning; if they miss school, they can't work in the afternoon. Personalized attention by school counselors and employers is a key component.

The program's objective is to balance the need to work with the need to go to school. A concern raised by critics, however, is that job responsibilities may interfere with school work.

Alternative settings

For some students, the regular school environment is too impersonal, too large—in general, overwhelming. Placing these students in a separate environment (in the school or elsewhere) where they can work at their own pace with personal attention is an alternative to watching them fail and drop out.

Newark High School (Newark, Ohio) started an alternative school in 1985 with a $12,000 grant from the Central Ohio Rural Consortium. Students at risk of dropping out were identified; some had absence rates as high as 80 percent.

Through the alternative program, which is located away from the comprehensive high school in a living room setting, students study the standard curriculum and receive personal counseling and career training. They work independently at their own pace except for three weekly lectures, and are assisted in obtaining part-time, after-school jobs. Every six weeks the students are evaluated. One indicator of the program's success is the 80 percent attendance rate. Another may be that the program is being emulated by nearby school systems.

Follow-up programs

Some students (one-third according to a recent study of 14-22 year olds) return to school, frequently to earn a GED. The Los Angeles Unified School District reported in July that 1,652 students graduated with an Adult School Diploma last June; 40 percent of them were former dropouts from local schools. The Adult School Diploma is recognized by business and industry as equivalent to a high school diploma.

L.A.'s "recovery" efforts, aimed at reenrolling dropouts in some kind of education program, are a major focus of the school system's adult education program. With classes offered in the afternoon, evening, and throughout the summer, the adult program (in which the average age of students has dropped to 19-20) gives students the flexibility they need to attend school at convenient times and to learn at their own pace.

In Duval County, Fla., 16- to 18-year-olds who have been out of school for six months or more are tracked down and recruited for a vocational education program. The school system provides bus transportation, and students are eligible to participate in extracurricular activities. Enrolled students earn a vocational certificate instead of a high school diploma, which meets the program's purpose of helping students become productively employed.

Federal assistance

The Dropout Prevention and Reentry Act of 1986 (H.R. 3042) was making its way through Congress during the summer. The Act is aimed at reducing the number of dropouts and encouraging students who have already dropped out to return to school through funding of demonstration programs. Another component of the legislation addresses the need for systematically collecting and reporting data on dropouts.

Under the Act, funding would be available on a matching basis for such activities as guidance and counseling services, special programs for potential dropouts, programs that involve community resources in working with targeted students, and staff development programs related to dropout prevention activities. (Watch *School Board News* for final action on the legislation.)

The federal government indirectly addresses potential dropouts through the Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA). In North Carolina, for example, JTPA grants are used to help students build their self-confidence and gain practical job-seeking skills. Begun in 1981 at North Edgecombe and Southwest High Schools (Edgecombe County), the elective program is offered to eligible (disadvantaged) seniors.

The year-long course focuses on personal development, building self-esteem, and developing positive attitudes toward work. A key component of the program, which has spread to 65 high schools, is the involvement of the business community.

No one model

Clearly, there is no one model program that all school systems can use to address the needs of "at risk" students. There are some characteristics, however, that seem to lead to success.

Among them are programs that have low student-adult ratios, are offered in a location separate from the comprehensive school, provide vocational training, offer a variety of school experiences combined with work, and provide such related services as counseling, day care, and medical care. In addition, intervening early with remedial help and social services—before students fall behind—results in increasing the chances of students staying in school.

What to do

Is your school system paying attention to the needs of at-risk students? If not, you may want to begin asking some questions, such as:

- What is our dropout rate? How do we define "dropout?"
- Are we collecting information about why students are leaving school prematurely? Is there a link between increased academic standards and the dropout rate? Is the problem solely related to disadvantaged and/or minority students?
- Does our promotion/retention policy lead to students dropping out?
- Are we providing programs, including staff inservice and social services support, to address the needs of potential dropouts?
- Do we collect follow-up information on dropouts, including how many return to school through adult education or other programs?
- Are there cooperative efforts we can undertake with the business and nonprofit communities?
- Are there government-funded programs that would benefit these students?

Finally, make sure that whatever you are doing or plan to do to prevent dropouts includes evaluation. Only through evaluation will you know which efforts are successful and should receive continued support. ■